

## Epiphany 1 – Wesley and St Aidan’s – 12<sup>th</sup> January 2014

Theme: ‘Baptism of Jesus’

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9 & Matthew 3:13-17

### Introduction

Today in the Lectionary readings we have the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew’s Gospel and the first of the Servant Songs from Isaiah 42 which give a guide to the form of that ministry, promised so long ago by the prophets and epitomized by the Isaiah passage.

We have come through the celebrations of Christmas and New Year and now centre both on the style of the ministry of the promised Messiah and on the individual chosen, Jesus the Christ, the promised of God, Immanuel which literally means ‘God with us’. Let us take a few minutes to look at these two passages.

### Isaiah 42:1-9

This first Servant Song from Duetero- Isaiah, shows or proffers a portrait of the kind of leadership that should be expected from one called by God. A patient, non-violent and merciful individual. God’s chosen does not execute justice by force. Indeed, this is a picture of tender care – for those who are vulnerable, for ideas still being brought forth, for small efforts in a sense trying to ‘take root’ in a rugged terrain. “A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”(vs3)

True, Godly leadership protects what is weak until it is strong enough to stand by itself, and likewise keeps gentle cupped hands around a weak flame until it can burn on its own. These word pictures show compassion for those who cannot care, for whatever reason, for themselves. In this way the Servant “will faithfully bring forth justice.” (vs3) Isaiah’s portrait of God’s Servant provides genuine – even startling – contrast to contemporary models of leadership in much of the world, that leave a legacy of pre-emptive wars, secret persecutions and elimination of opposition, military rule, no freedom of speech etc. Even in Australia our parliamentary leadership is often confrontative, can be rude, is not always compassionate and caring. Hence it would be an interesting exercise to see a candidate running on a platform, based on this Servant Song from Isaiah. Can you imagine it or a high powered business person using this as their guide for company management?!

However Isaiah indicates that this is a tough model for the Servant and “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.” (vs4)

However Jesus took the shape of his ministry from the images, symbols, hopes and visions of passages like the Servant Songs of Isaiah. On this Sunday as we remember Jesus’ baptism at the beginning of his ministry, we should try to hear the words of Isaiah 42 as Jesus heard them. Jesus clearly felt addressed by this model of ministry evoked in such Hebrew Scripture passages as in a few weeks’ time we hear Jesus articulating the vision of his own ministry in the words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

The social justice, the care and the compassion of the Godly model of ministry are found in vss 6-8.

It is in the vein of the prophecy of Isaiah that we see Jesus as the fulfiller of that Servant role, predicted so long before his birth.

### Matthew 3: 13-17

Our Gospel today marks both the ending of the story of John the Baptist, the preparer of the way, but also the return to the central character of the Gospel, Jesus, the promised Messiah and his baptism. John the Baptist had prophesied the coming of the Messiah, the promised of God, and here we have him receiving and eventually baptizing Jesus even though Jesus needed no forgiveness. In a sense Jesus' baptism is a sign to John and to the people that this is the promised one of God. The water is insignificant. What happens is significant. There is the 'opening of the heavens', the 'Spirit of God descending like a dove' and the voice from heaven saying: "this is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (vs17)

There is the symbolism of a blessing from God even before Jesus began his missional ministry. We do not understand all that happened here but this semi-public baptism was a sign for John and the people that Jesus' ministry was beginning and he was the one called by God. This is part of the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke and was seen as incredibly important by the early church writers identifying Jesus both with humanity and with God.

### Story

There is a lovely story I came across in my reading around this passage. Let me share it with you.

Mario was a formerly homeless man who lived in a shelter. He had lived on the streets for half his life. He spent his sixtieth birthday with friends at a church dinner in the shelter. Several people reckoned that Mario wasn't sixty. Responding to this comment, Mario reached into his coat pocket and pulled out two pieces of paper. The first was indeed his birth certificate which proved that he was sixty as he had said. Then he said, "Do you want to see my baptismal certificate?" Indeed it was his baptismal certificate that showed that he had been baptized as an infant in a church not far from the shelter where he now lived. Too often we are tempted to forget that God has claimed all people as his beloved children. Living on the streets for more than half his life, Mario had been called many derogatory names such as a bum, a bludger, scum and so forth but he had remembered that he was a child of God and loved by God. His baptismal certificate was proof of that for him.

Even though others through their words and actions declared Mario to be worthless, he carried two pieces of paper that said otherwise and gave him hope. His birth certificate recalled his parents who named him out of love. His baptismal certificate recalled the God and the congregation who loved him and claimed him as a child of God. At this dinner, surrounded by church friends, he again was able to affirm that he was loved by God and supported by his congregation.

### Conclusion

As we go forth into the year of 2014, as we hear voices that judge us and are disparaging towards us, we need to remember God's voice at Jesus' baptism and take it to heart for ourselves as we strive to be Jesus' disciples. As we hear ourselves 'putting down' someone else verbally, or in any way, we need to listen afresh for the challenge of God's word both in the Servant Song of Isaiah and in the Gospel for this day. In our living we need to reflect the life of Christ so that as we listen for God's word for us we may hear, "You are my daughter, my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Amen.